

A Comparative study of Gandhi and Nehru and in their Autobiographies

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Autobiography is usually defined as a retrospective narrative written about one's life, in the first person and in prose. Such writing has appeared with increasing frequency in Western Literature since the beginning of nineteenth century but after World War II, it gained considerable significance. Now autobiographies all over the world and especially in India are extensively read and enjoyed, but paradoxically enough, they have received very scant critical attention, let alone comparative treatment. The comparative approach to literature enables us to widen our critical horizon and develop the concept of prevalent literary tendencies in the world as well as the different regions of a nation.

The comparative study of authors belonging to the different nations should be preceded by that of authors belonging to the same country, preferably coming from two different parts of the country belonging to two different fields and professions. It is needless to say, that the comparative

study aims at establishing the universality and oneness of human experience through the depiction of diverse peculiarities of it.

Jawaharlal Nehru and M.K. Gandhi are incontrovertibly two significant Indian English writers. A comparative study of autobiographies of two significant writers belonging to two different, in fact, diametrically opposed back grounds will, no doubt be as delightful as profitable. Both of them belonged to the freedom struggle of India and had an ambition to make the country independent. Both of them belonged to political arena of India during the British Rule, but Gandhi was not fully. As a writer both of them practiced the same genre, they sharply differ from each other in the manner of presentation and focus. A study of the similarity between the two will inevitably show their dissimilarity and establish their distinct identities.

Both Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi are known as good autobiographers. It is a matter of pleasure for the reader or critic to notice that both Nehru and Gandhi have formulated their own theories about the art of autobiography. The theoretical differences between the two naturally create the presentation differences also. They throw light upon the two radically different personalities moulded by two different atmospheres. They differ from each other in their tastes, preoccupations, professions, family backgrounds, economic status, temperaments and world views etc. For example Nehru is aware of the difficulty of writing the autobiography. In fact, he begins his autobiography with a question from Abraham Cowley which expresses the difficulty of practicing the art of autobiography. Cowley says that:

It is a hard and nice subject for a man to write about himself: it grates his own heart to say anything of disparagement, and the reader's ears to hear anything of praise for him. (1)

But Gandhi does not discuss or quote a passage regarding the theory of autobiography, but in the introduction he tells us that:

Writing an autobiography is a practice peculiar to the West. I know of nobody in the East having written one, except amongst those who have come under Western influence. And what will you write? Supposing you reject tomorrow the things you hold as principles today, or supposing you revise in the future your plans of today, is it not likely that the men who shape their conduct on the authority of your word, spoken or written, may be misled; Don't you think it would be better not to write anything like an autobiography, at any rate just yet? (9)

Gandhi elaborates on his role as autobiographer by announcing and responding to the doubts a "God Fearing Friend" had about Gandhi's writing his *My Experiments with Truth*.

Gandhi wrote his autobiography when he was in his fifties. Therefore, there is no need for him to change his opinions as his outlook on life has almost been formed and fixed. Moreover, he was a well known figure at that time and therefore his autobiography had a direct influence on its readers. Written at the age of forty-five, Nehru's autobiography is a literary expression of a man at the height of his powers.

However the two autobiographies picture the two different sides of Indian life, viz., spiritual and secular. As a spiritualist Gandhi aims at the moral and spiritual enrichment of the readers of his autobiography. As a secularist, Nehru's autobiography emphasizes his faith in science

and scientific outlook – a faith partly inherited from his father who was keenly interested in practical science. Since the two autobiographies picture the two different faces of India, the time, occasion, the declared aims of the authors and the revealed objectives such as personal, public are worth considering to make a comparative study of this kind.

The autobiographies of Gandhi and Nehru are mines of gold. They contain great treasures. Gandhi's autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth* especially that written after his experiments with life carries precious ideas about religion, art, truth, Ahimsa, brahmacharya, education, satyagraha, diet etc. His autobiography has a moral value as well. That by Nehru is largely political and continues his struggle for Freedom and his experience of jail life. In Nehru's autobiography we find his precious thoughts on communalism, communism, democracy, internationalism and nationalism. He also includes the most burning problems of the present day i.e. the problem of terrorism in his writing.

Gandhi wrote his autobiography when he was almost fully matured. For writing his compendious autobiography, Gandhi depends upon his memory with which he is well endowed. But it is clear when he began writing, he had no definite plan before him. Nehru wrote his autobiography in the prison in order to recapitulate the past events. Sometimes he looks behind in order to join the threads of the past to the future. The innermost desire of Nehru to keep into the secrets of India's heart and mind must have driven him to write the story of life. As this story is written in dismal and sordid surroundings of the prison, it is naturally a bit pessimistic.

Gandhi does not claim any finality about his opinion and principle. He simply wants to tell the story of his numerous experiments with Truth. In writing his autobiography, he is not guided by any model. On the other hand Nehru was not concerned with so called experiments. His autobiography serves a dual purpose. He makes use of his enforced leisure in jail, and begins the task in a mood of self-questioning and to a large extent, this persisted throughout. His primary object is to occupy himself with some definite task in order to ward off the boredom of 'long solitudes of jail life, as well as to review the past events in India, with which he was intimately connected.' The revelation of truth has been the Gandhi's main aim in writing his autobiography. He writes his autobiography not to please his critics. It has an educated and didactic purpose. Nehru's primary object is obviously to make constructive use of his time spent in prison and to record his own mental development.

Gandhi's autobiography is 'a spiritual manual, an absorbing human document, agonizingly frank and unflinchingly honest in its self-portraiture'. Nehru's autobiography, 'a sketchy, personal and incomplete account of the past', presents a vivid picture of both the man and his milieu. The autobiographers, therefore, reveal not only the private, but also the public side of their personality in their autobiographies. The self-revelation which is the main element in the art of autobiography writing, remains in the background, but it is their rational character which is of importance here.

In their autobiographies, Gandhi's God, as revealed through his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth* is the Absolute Truth, because he worshipped God as Truth only. This truth is not only truthfulness in words but truthfulness in thought also, and not only the relative truth of our conception, but the Eternal Principle, that is God. The word 'God' appears dozens of times in the autobiography and God has clearly has pride place in Gandhi's world view. On the other hand, Nehru differs from the traditional religious outlook. Nehru thinks that religion, if properly understood consists of the inner development of the individual and also the evolution of his consciousness. He believes that religious outlook does help the moral and spiritual development of a people provided morality and spirituality are not linked with what happens after death. Religion Nehru argues convincingly, boils down to an asocial quest for more with his own salvation than with the good of society. The organized religion, thus, acts as a reactionary force opposing change and progress.

In their autobiographies we also find the differences on the point of politics. Nehru was emphatic that politics should be based on reason and clarity of thoughts. Gandhi on the other hand was guided by inner voice that is the voice that comes out of the depth of truth. Nehru was a student of science and therefore made a scientific approach to any and every problem. Gandhi did not attach any importance to intellectual process. Gandhi being a spiritualist desires to change the very nature of politics by spiritualizing it, Nehru strongly opposes the use of religion in politics. Gandhi is drawn into political field because of his unquenchable thirst for truth. As a spiritualist, he justifies his stand for mixing religion with politics. He successfully launches Satyagraha into

political field as a non-violent weapon for resisting evil with righteousness. It is Gandhi's strong devotion to truth that has drawn him into political field. Thus Gandhi wanted a blending of politics with ethics, the immediate

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